

Dismantling Civil Service Passes Senate Despite Disturbing Debate

Written by Kathleen Vinehout, State Senator 31st District
Tuesday, 26 January 2016 15:17 -

<http://newiproggressive.com/images/stories/S5/union-members-at-capitol-250.jpg>



During the Senate debate to pass the bill dismantling our 100-year-old civil service system, senators told of secret meetings held with state workers where supervisors intimidated employees and forbid them to talk with their elected representatives. A LAB Hotline established is valuable in cases of intimidation.

MADISON - One by one Senators stood on the Senate floor and told of secret meetings held with state workers. Supervisors had forbid employees to talk with their elected representatives. Employees felt intimidated. They wanted to improve state services but were afraid of losing their jobs if they raised questions of mismanagement.

Late in the evening, the Senate passed a bill to dismantle our over 100-year-old civil service system put in place by Governor La Follette to ensure that 'the best shall serve the state'.

The dismantling of protections for state service workers seemed already done as I listened to debate on AB 373. Prior to the vote, I heard some of the most disturbing testimony I've ever heard on the Senate floor. Testimony shared by Senators who spoke directly to intimidated workers with knowledge of mismanagement and abuse.

Corrections workers told a Senator about an inmate strangling a psychiatrist such that the doctor would probably never work again. State workers forced to work so much overtime, it stressed their marriages because workers were never home. Employees were afraid to speak up about wrong doings and dangerous situations. Workers were fearful supervisors would spy on them if they participated in meetings with their own elected representatives.

The climax of the evening came with the testimony of Senator Bewley from Ashland. She described the chilling effect employee intimidation had on her ability to represent her constituent.

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“...As I was sitting here and I was thinking of sharing a story with the body, Mr. President about a constituent who told me please don’t tell anybody. And I was going to say a little bit about his circumstances but I realized I better keep my mouth shut in this body, with my colleagues that I’m supposed to trust, because if I say too much he could lose his job. In front of my own colleagues, we are setting up an atmosphere where I worry about my constituent’s job lest someone here find out who he is and get him fired.

...This is not the state we want to be in. I do not want to be afraid of discussing the concerns of my constituents with my colleagues for fear that someone will overhear something, have too much information, find out who that employee was and have him lose his job. That is what we are setting up. And, this is what you are going to have to defend to your own constituents after you take this vote today”.

Following the night of disturbing debate, I spoke with State Auditor Joe Chrisman. I asked what he could offer to employees who were too afraid to confront state mismanagement. He offered the Fraud, Waste, and Mismanagement Hotline, staffed by the nonpartisan Legislative Audit Bureau (LAB), which investigate reports made to its Hotline.

“There are so many protections put in place that protect those who call the hotline,” Mr. Chrisman told me. Callers to the hotline are provided some of the strongest whistle-blower protections in state law.

“Statutes require the Bureau to maintain the confidentiality of the identity of the caller at all times,” Mr. Chrisman said. “This means more than just the name of the caller.” Protections may include keeping the person’s job title, position, gender, agency, institution, or campus confidential.

Anyone can reach the hotline at 1-877-FRAUD-17 (1-877-372-8317). During business hours, trained staff answers hotline calls.

People can call during off hours and leave a voice message. They can complete a web-based form, or they can print off the form, fill it out and send it by snail mail.

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They can leave information without leaving their name. However, Mr. Chrisman cautions, in doing so it is more challenging for auditors to follow-up. "Sometimes all we need are answers to two questions to proceed in an investigation."

Even if the problem identified by the caller becomes part of an investigative report, state law requires the caller, including any identifiable details, still be protected.

As we discussed the problems in key agencies like Corrections, Mr. Chrisman said, "Tools exist at the Bureau for these kinds of reasons." I encourage people to contact the LAB Hotline to report confidentially any concerns with state government.